

## Message Text

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ACTION AF-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07

L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 OMB-01 AID-05 /074 W

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R 160800Z APR 77

FM AMCONSUL ASMARA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4461

AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

INFO AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

AMEMBASSY NAIROBI

CINCUSNAVEUR LONDON

COMNAVTELCOM WASHDC

USCINCEUR VAHINGEN

COMIDEASTFOR

NAVCOMMUNIT ASMARA

NAVCOMMSTA NEA MAKRI

CNO WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 0312

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS ET

SUBJECT: THE MILITARY SITUATION: AN UPDATE

REF: ASMARA 0292 (DTG 110720Z APR 77)

1. SUMMARY: THE FIRST TEN DAYS OF APRIL WITNESSED SEVERAL MILITARY REVERSES FOR THE EPMG FORCES (REFTTEL) WHICH, WHILE FURTHER DIMINISHING THE PRESTIGE AND MORALE OF THESE FORCES, MAY, ON CLOSER ANALYSIS, IMPROVE THE SEVERELY STRAINED LOGISTICS SITUATION. THE LAST EPMG POSITION IN SAHEL PROVINCE, AFABET, FELL TO INSURGENT ATTACK, BUT WAS PROBABLY UNTENABLE ANYWAY. THE RELIEF FORCE DESTINED FOR AFABET ABANDONED ITS EFFORTS EVEN BEFORE  
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THAT TOWN FELL BECAUSE OF STRONG REBEL OPPOSITION. THE LARGELY DEVASTATED ELABERET ESTATE WAS ABANDONED AND THE GARRISON RETURNED TO KEREN. THE TOWNS OF TESSENAY AND ALI GEDER IN THE WESTERN LOWLANDS WERE TAKEN BY THE REBELS, BUT EPMG FORCES STILL HAVE A TENUOUS HOLD ON SEVERAL POSITIONS IN THE IMMEDIATE AREA. END SUMMARY

2. SAHEL: FIFTEEN DAYS AFTER THE FALL OF NACFA, THE PROVINCE CAPITAL, TO AN INSURGENT SURPRISE ATTACK, THE EPMG'S LAST STRONG-HOLD IN THAT ISOLATED AND MOUNTAINOUS PROVINCE WAS OVERRUN ON APRIL 6 BY INSURGENT FORCES. WHILE THE "LIBERATION" OF THEIR FIRST PROVINCE IN ERITREA WILL GIVE THE INSURGENTS A BOOST IN INTERNATIONAL STATURE, THE VICTORY IS NOT OF OVERRIDING SIGNIFICANCE. AFABET HAD TWO MAJOR DISADVANTAGES WHICH RENDERED IT VIRTUALLY UNTENABLE IN THE FACE OF A DETERMINED ATTACK. FIRST, IT HAS ONLY ONE LARGE WELL AND COULD NOT SUSTAIN MORE THAN A FEW HUNDRED TROOPS, AND SECOND, THERE IS NO AIR STRIP IN THE AREA. APPARENTLY AWARE OF THESE DRAWBACKS, THE EPMG DID NOT MAKE A SERIOUS EFFORT TO REINFORCE THE GARRISON BY HELICOPTER. THE EPMG RELIEF COLUMN WHICH LEFT KEREN IN LATE MARCH WAS TO LIFT THE SIEGE OF AFABET BY DIVERTING FORCES FROM THAT OPERATION. IT WAS STALLED AFTER 18 KM BY REBEL DEFENDERS AND CLEARLY FAILED IN THIS ATTEMPT. IT THEN RETURNED TO KEREN EVEN BEFORE AFABET FELL TO THE REBELS.

3. KEREN: WITH THE FALL OF AFABET ON APRIL 6, EPMG COMMANDERS APPARENTLY DECIDED TO CONSOLIDATE THEIR FORCES IN THAT CITY WHICH IS OF MAJOR POLITICAL AND HISTORIC IMPORTANCE. ON APRIL 9 THE EPMG GARRISON AT ELABERET WAS WITHDRAWN AND RETURNED TO KEREN BY ROAD WITHOUT INCIDENT. THERE ARE REPORTS THAT INSURGENTS WERE SEEN WATCHING THE EVACUATION AND, AS THE FEW SCORE REMAINING CATTLE WERE LEFT ON THE PLANTATION, THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT THE WITHDRAWAL WAS CONDUCTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH A PRE-ARRANGED AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE EPMG TROOPS AND THE REBELS. ONE REPORT FROM KEREN CLAIMS THAT LAST WEEK THE INSURGENTS WARNED THE CITY'S RESIDENTS TO EVACUATE THE CITY WITHIN 20 DAYS. WHILE THERE ARE CONFIDENTIAL

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NO REPORTS THAT SIGNIFICANT REBEL FORCES ARE MOVING INTO THE AREA AROUND KEREN, THIS WARNING MAY MEAN THAT THE INSURGENTS PLAN TO INVEST THAT CITY WITHIN THE NEAR FUTURE. THIS WOULD BRING THE VICTORIOUS PLF FORCES FROM NACFA AND AFABET SOUTH TO KEREN ALONG WITH THE ELF FORCES SOUTHEAST OF THE CITY UP AGAINST AN ESTIMATED 7000 EPMG TROOPS. IN ANTICIPATION OF THIS MOVE, EPMG FORCES HAVE BEEN OBSERVED STRENGTHENING THEIR FORTIFICATION AROUND KEREN FOR WHAT SHOULD PROVE A PROTRACTED SIEGE.

4. WESTERN LOWLANDS: ELF FORCES IN GASH SETIT AND AGORDAT PROVINCES ARE INCREASING THEIR PRESSURE ON THE EPMG GARRISONS AT TESSENAY, BARENTU AND AGORDAT. THE TESSENAY SITUATION HAS DETERIORATED VERY RAPIDLY FOR THE EPMG WITH REBELS TAKING THE BARATTOLO PLANTATION AND THE TOWN AND AIRPORT OF TESSENAY. REPORTS STATE THAT EPMG FORCES ARE STILL HOLDING FORTIFIED POSITIONS IN THE AREA OF TESSENAY, BUT THESE TROOPS ARE NOW DEPENDENT ON AIR DROPS FOR RE-SUPPLY. IN BARENTU, THERE WERE SEVERAL REBEL ATTACKS, BUT THE EPMG TROOPS ARE KNOWN TO STILL HOLD THE TOWN AND THE AIRPORT. IN AGORDAT THERE HAVE BEEN ONLY HARRASSING ATTACKS DURING

THIS PERIOD. ABOUT 20 TRUCK DRIVER/OWNERS WERE FLOWN TO AGORDAT ON APRIL 13 TO SUPERVISE THE OFF-LOADING OF THEIR TRUCKS WHICH HAVE BEEN STUCK THERE SINCE EARLY LAST SUMMER. THEIR TRUCKS ARE THEN TO BE COMMANDEERED BY THE EPMG GARRISON.

5. COASTAL REGION: THERE HAS BEEN NO SIGNIFICANT ACTIVITY IN THESE AREAS AS THE ASMARA-MASSAWA CONVOYS HAVE RUN UNMOLESTED. THERE HAVE BEEN SOME MINOR INCIDENTS IN MASSAWA INCLUDING A REPORTED TRUCK HIJACKING, BUT THERE HAS BEEN NO ACTIVITY COINCIDENT WITH THE OFFENSIVE IN NORTH AND WESTERN ERITREA. THERE HAVE BEEN NO FURTHER REPORTS ON INSURGENT MOVEMENTS TOWARD ASSAB.

6. THE HIGHLANDS: THIS REGION HAS REMAINED QUIET AS THE EPMG GARRISONS IN THE ISOLATED TOWNS ALONG THE TWO MAIN NORTH-SOUTH ROADS REMAIN DEPENDENT ON AIRLIFTED SUPPLIES. THE LOGISTICAL SITUATION HAS NOT IMPROVED AS DEMONSTRATED BY TWO ABORTED EFFORTS (ONE IN MARCH AND ONE IN MID-APRIL) TO DISPATCH A ROAD CONVOY  
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TO DEBAROA AND ADI UGRI. THE FIRST EFFORT WAS ABANDONED WHEN RESISTANCE WAS ENCOUNTERED BETWEEN ASMARA AND DEBAROA, AND THE MOST RECENT WAS GIVEN UP WHEN THE EPMG APPARENTLY RECEIVED REPORTS THAT STRONG REBEL RESISTANCE WAS LIKELY. MOST OF THE INSURGENT FORCES RAISED IN THE HIGHLANDS (HAMASIEN, SERAE AND AKULA GUZAI) ARE NOT BEING DEPLOYED IN OTHER PROVINCES IN THE REGION. THEY ARE KNOWN TO HAVE CONSTRUCTED BASE CAMPS AND SUPPLY AREAS FOR USE WHEN INSURGENT EFFORTS FOCUS ON THE HIGHLANDS.

7. COMMENT: WHILE THE LOSS OR ABANDONMENT OF TESSENAY, AFABET AND ELABERET IN THE SPAN OF A WEEK CONSTITUTES A CLEAR REVERSE FOR THE EPMG, THESE SETBACKS SHOULD EASE SOMEWHAT THE SEVERE LOGISTIC PROBLEMS. AFABET WAS SUPPLIED BY AIR DROPS AND HELICOPTERS. THIS WAS ALSO TRUE AT ELABERET EXCEPT WHEN THE EPMG DIVERTED SUFFICIENT FORCE TO PUSH THROUGH BY ROAD. THE RETURN OF THE AFABET-DESTINED RELIEF FORCE ALSO PERMITS A LOGISTICAL CONSOLIDATION WHICH RENDERS KEREN AN EXTREMELY FORMIDABLE STRONGHOLD. ONLY THE SITUATION IN TESSENAY INCREASES RATHER THAN DIMINISHES THE LOGISTIC BURDEN. AIR DROPS ARE NOT ONLY MORE DELICATE AND HAZARDOUS THAN AIRLIFTING SUPPLIES, BUT WHEN PARACHUTES GO ASTRAY THE ERROR STRENGTHENS THE BESIEGING FORCES.  
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## Message Attributes

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